

“Life’s a Bitch, and then you *don’t* die.” Postmortality in Film and Television

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Ephemeroi, the ancient Greeks called us: those who live only for a day. Mortality defines our existence. Only the gods are immortal and can hope to live forever. Although (other) animals, too, are mortal, at least they don’t know that they are. They don’t have to worry about it. We, on the other hand, worry about death constantly. Even small children learn very quickly that everyone has to die, even their moms and dads, and even they themselves, and it frightens them. Death, however irrational it may be to fear it, is for most of us a terrifying prospect almost right from the start. Virtually our whole lives are overshadowed by our own (never very far-off and always potentially imminent) death, the spectre of non-existence, as well as the death of everything and everyone we love and hold dear. If there is anything that defines us as humans, it is the knowledge of our own mortality. Hence, if we hope to transcend our human existence, to become more and other than human, then we will have to find ways to overcome our mortality. In order to become properly posthuman, if that is what we want, we need to realise postmortality.

That is why for transhumanists life and health extension has the highest priority among all possible areas of human enhancement. Radical, indefinite life extension is something like the holy grail of transhumanism. Death is the greatest evil (More 1996, Bostrom 2005), and life consequently the supreme good. And if death is the worst that can happen to a person then it follows that no price can be too high to pay to avoid one’s own death as long as possible and to achieve virtual immortality. Advances in medical knowledge and the exponentially increasing progress of technology and what it allows us to do make it seem likely that we will very soon, in a few decades or so, be able to halt and possibly reverse the aging process, so that we will be able to keep living for an indefinite amount of time, without ever losing our youthfulness or our mental and physical powers (de Grey & Rae 2007). We might never be immortal in a strict sense, because it is hard to see how it should be possible for there to be a thing that simply *cannot* be destroyed, a thing whose existence *cannot* end. But we may very well, for all we know now, before long become immortal in the sense that we will no longer *have* to die in the natural course of events. This is what I call *postmortality*.

In film and television the postmortal condition and all that it entails has often been examined through the figure of the vampire, which is not to say that vampires should normally be regarded as posthumans, on the contrary. Traditionally, vampires were represented as an alien species, equipped with supernatural powers, a creature that is decidedly not human, and if it ever was, then it has since undergone a radical transformation in the process of which everything that was human has been eradicated and replaced by something inhuman. It is not a *development* of the human, as the posthuman must always conceivably be, but a *replacement* of the human. The vampire is a shape shifter who effortlessly sheds the human form whenever it suits him, turning into a bat or a wolf or some other feral creature. He is thus no more human than animal, a being that can be anything and hence is everything and nothing. The numerous film versions of Count Dracula, including Murnau's (1922) and Herzog's *Nosferatu* (1979), which were also based on Stoker's classic novel, as well as most other vampires in film and television until recently (for instance in Joel Schumacher's *The Lost Boys*, Quentin Tarantino's *From Dusk till Dawn*, or Josh Hartnett's *30 Days of Night*) are in fact all little more than blood-sucking monsters, more subhuman than superhuman, and so are those humans that are being bitten and killed by them. Once they have died and changed, have become "undead", they have forgotten all their human interests and values, and have only one goal left: that of satisfying their thirst for human blood and thus turning more humans into vampires. The monstrosity of the traditional vampire is also reflected in the fact that no human in their right mind *wants* to be transformed into a vampire, just as no human in their right mind wants to be transformed into a zombie. The human who is bitten by the vampire is cast as a victim of an alien force that annihilates its human core. Thus the vampire is not presented as posthuman (if by "posthuman" we understand the result of a development of the human into something else and in some way better), but simply as inhuman. He invites no identification and does not stimulate any desire in his victims (or in us viewers) to be like him. He does not represent a human possibility, not an opportunity for refinement or even something more than that: salvation.

But things have changed: in some more recent productions the virtual immortality or extreme longevity of the vampire no longer identifies the terror-inducing alien. Rather, it is increasingly seen as the essential feature of an alternative and immensely desirable way of being, providing a viable alternative to the disappointments and downright misery of a merely human, mortal life. Thus in Joss Whedon's *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) Floyd, the leader of a group of teenagers who like to dress up as vampires and to imitate what they fancy

to be the vampire life style, makes a deal with the real vampires (Season 2, Episode 7: “Lie to Me”). He will deliver the other members of his group to them, to be sucked dry and killed, and in exchange the vampires will make him one of their own and give him eternal life. When Buffy, who discovers his plan, remonstrates with him, telling him that “those people do not deserve to die”, he replies: “Neither do I.” It is then revealed that he suffers from terminal cancer and unless he is saved by the vampires he is going to die very soon. Thus the imminence of his own death, combined with the belief that it is *unfair* that someone so young has to die and the promise of a second chance leads him to throw all moral concerns over board and to betray and sacrifice his friends. He already sees himself as what he believes he will very soon become, a postmortal being that no longer has any obligations to anything that, or anyone who, is merely human. “I will become immortal”, he declares, and he persists to believe that despite Buffy’s protestations that this is “not how it works: you die, a demon replaces you, remembers you, talks like you, but it’s not you”. Thus the idea that the vampire is not, and can never be, an enhanced version of the human, is still reasserted by Buffy, although characters like Angel and Spike - both of which are vampires who reacquire their soul and thus become rehumanised, while retaining their immortality - suggest otherwise. Here the vampire already appears as a love interest, though still with an ambivalence that is largely absent from later productions such as the television series *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-), which, in by now more than one hundred episodes, follows its female teenage protagonist Elena as she divides her affection between two equally gorgeous-looking vampires, or the five parts of the *Twilight Saga* (2008-2012), which sees the female teenage protagonist Bella fall in love with the, once again gorgeous-looking, vampire Edward, marry him and then give birth to an immortal child that is half-human and half-vampire, thus completing the mergence of human and vampire and suggesting the possibility of a new race of posthuman (and postmortal) beings that humanity develops into. Buffy may of course still be right when she asserts a lack of identity between the human and the vampire that they become. Yet we can understand Buffy’s assertion simply as a claim about the relation between the human (i.e. mortal) and the posthuman (i.e. postmortal): in order for the posthuman to live, the human must die. That is why the posthuman is necessarily the posthumous and postmortality can only be achieved post mortem, or in other words: in order to become *more* than human, we need to become *other* than human.

That the postmortality of the posthuman requires the death of the human is, of course, not necessarily a bad thing. Whether it is, or appears to be, depends on our attitude towards a

human life that is, by virtue of being human, utterly enmeshed in mortality. Such a life can be hard to bear. Thus in Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) we travel back in time to late 18th century Louisiana, where we meet the 24-year old plantation owner Louis, for whom "life has no meaning anymore" and who seeks "release from the pain of living" after losing his wife and child. In this situation, the vampire Lestat promises him a new life, one in which "sickness and death can never touch you again" and "you can be young always". Louis agrees and is turned into a vampire by Lestat, becoming postmortal in the process, but in contrast to Lestat, Louis tries hard to retain his humanity and not to become the monster that his vampire nature urges him to be. He still feels very much like a human, but his newly gained postmortality, his escape "from the pain of living", has a price that eventually he must pay. Not only can he not avoid living off the deaths of other humans whose blood he must drink to survive, he also ceases to change and develop in any meaningful way. When Louis tries to console Claudia, the child vampire that Lestat has given him for a companion, by telling her that "you will never grow old and you will never die", she replies, "but that also means I never grow up". This is echoed in the opening scene of Michael and Peter Spierig's *Daybreakers* (2009), which shows a young vampire girl of perhaps nine or ten sitting on the ground outside and waiting for the sun to rise and destroy her, leaving behind written words that explain her decision: "I will never grow up; I can't go on". The price we have to pay for eternal youth is eternal youth, but only of the body, not of the mind, which makes it even worse due to the ensuing disparity between mind and body. When at the end of *Interview with the Vampire* Louis, after 200 years of a pointless existence, is interviewed by a present day reporter, who becomes so intrigued by Louis's story that he implores him to transfer what he sees as the gift of eternal life to him and make him a vampire too, he flatly refuses to grant him his wish. The reason for Louis's refusal is not that he doesn't want to share the gift, but on the contrary that he has come to realise that a postmortal life is more a burden than a blessing. He describes himself as "detached, unchangeable, empty". If life was meaningless before he became one of the undead, it is even more meaningless now. If life was painful while he was still mortal, it is even more painful, though perhaps in a different way, now that he is postmortal. Postmortality looks promising to the mortal, but to the postmortal it is, or can easily become after a while, hell.

This has got nothing to do with being a vampire, and instead everything with being postmortal. A similar sentiment is expressed in Jerome Bixby's *The Man from Earth* (2007), in which a college professor tells his friends that he has in fact been around for 14,000 years,

starting his life as a Cro-Magnon: while others may envy him for having been granted first-hand experience of so many exciting historical events, he is rather weary of his life and emphasises the solitude and the accumulation of losses that come with immortality. Yet even if one wasn't the only one who no longer had to die and one could live in a society of immortals or postmortals, a postmortal existence might prove to be unbearable. In Andrew Nichol's *In Time* (2011), which is set 150 years in the future, scientists have finally managed to stop people from ageing, so that in theory everyone can stay young forever. In practice, however, it is only the very rich who can realistically hope to live very long, while the poor, who are being used to provide the resources needed to sustain the system, continue to die. Society is organised in such a way that everyone is genetically engineered to stop aging at the age of 25, after which they have only one more year to live unless they buy more time through their labour. If they earn less time than they spend (in this story time literally *is* money), their time will run out and they die. The film tells the story of a poor factory worker called Will who suddenly finds himself with a lot of time on his hands through a chance encounter with a rich stranger who is tired of living and who, before he commits suicide, transfers all his time to Will, which he then uses to start a war against the society that has virtually enslaved him and his fellow workers. The stranger who transfers his time to Will throws his postmortality away for reasons that are very similar to those Louis, in *Interview with the Vampire*, has for refusing to share his "gift" with the reporter. Your mind, he says, "can be spent even when your body is not"; you then want to die because you "have been alive too long". Again, postmortal life turns out to be less than desirable because it is haunted by what Bernard Williams called the "tedium of immortality" (1973). Even those who have no intention to let their life run out and give up their time, those who cling to the privilege, even they cannot enjoy their life as life should be enjoyed. The postmortal life has a certain undead quality to it. As Sylvia, the daughter of a rich businessman with whom Will gets romantically involved, puts it: "the poor die and the rich don't live. We never do anything foolish or courageous." For the postmortal, life is too precious to risk it. Thus their lives become shallow and meaningless. Yet even if that were not so, postmortality might be judged too pricey, especially if this price has to be paid by somebody else, which is a recurring theme throughout the genre. When Sylvia remonstrates with her father on the injustice of the system she exclaims "we're not meant to live forever". And when her father tells her "everyone wants to live forever; the truth is, for a few to be immortal many must die", she replies: "No one should be immortal if even one person has to die."

The vampire is the perfect image of a postmortality that is derived from the death of others. In the aforementioned *Daybreakers* human society has been taken over by vampires who now live almost exactly the lives that humans used to live: they go to work, have jobs, live in apartments, wear suits and ties, smoke cigarettes and drive around in cars. There is not really much difference between them and the humans, except for their slightly reddish eyes, the deadly effect that the sunlight has on them, the fact that they are not mortal, and the need for human blood to survive. They remember who they were when they were still human, and most of them see their transformation into vampires as a positive development: “we are blessed”. In their view they have simply evolved to a posthuman condition. For others, however, especially, but not exclusively, the few humans that are still around, the transition from human to vampire does not represent evolution, but is simply a disease, for which they are desperate to find a cure. But the number of humans is dwindling, since they are hunted down by the authorities (after having refused the “chance to assimilate”). Once captured they are farmed for blood supply, just as we farm cattle or chickens, in a very civilized and orderly fashion, as superior beings (or those that think of themselves as superior) are wont to do. Unfortunately, however, there not enough humans left to feed the entire vampire population, which has some unpleasant consequences. Starving vampires very quickly shed the veneer of human civilization (and civilness) and degenerate into bat-like monsters that attack everyone, including their fellow vampires, who consequently live in fear of them. Thus in this film the vampires appear to be both very human in their habits (and posthuman due to their postmortality) and at the same time (always very close beneath the surface) as blood-sucking monsters. In other words, the enhanced human or posthuman and the monster appear to be two sides of the same.

This basic ambiguity is also emphasised in Oliver Parker’s *Dorian Gray* (2009), which is an adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s novel, in which a young man trades his innocence and moral integrity for eternal youth and beauty: no matter how long he lives and what he does, he stays outwardly the same, while his portrait shows not only his real age, but also all the marks of his increasing moral corruption. It shows the monster that he is gradually becoming, perhaps inevitably, as the price that *must* be paid for the privilege of not having to grow old. Yet already in the opening scene of the film we see Dorian stabbing someone, without showing us whom, and then holding a bloody garment to his lips, as if he wanted to suck the blood out of it, just like a vampire might. It later turns out that the one he stabbed in this scene is Basil, his friend and the painter of his portrait. We learn that just before he kills him he asserts his

superiority, his status as an elevated being, by crying out: “I am a God.” (Earlier in the film he is being told that “everything is possible for you because you have the only things worth having: youth and beauty”.) Thus he asserts his godlike status, which he has, or thinks he has, by virtue of his postmortality, by cutting the moral ties that bind him to the human world and killing a human being, that is, a member of a race that he no longer belongs to.

Similarly, in *Daybreakers* the relative humanity of the posthuman vampire depends on their inhuman treatment of the remaining humans. Those vampires who refuse to drink human blood (because they don’t want to take part in the exploitation and ultimately destruction of the human race), risk losing their humanity. Once again, postmortality comes with a high price tag attached to it, though for those willing to pay the price, it is certainly worth it. “Immortality gave me my cure”, explains the boss of a pharmacological company dealing in human blood supplies who suffered from terminal cancer before he was turned into a vampire. From this perspective, the parasitical existence of the vampire (which is not so different from our own) is not a disease, but the cure to a disease, and that disease to which it is a cure is our mortal human life as a whole with its many inadequacies and indignities. These inadequacies and indignities explain the lure of immortality, which is perhaps most charmingly displayed in Ron Howard’s *Cocoon* (1985), in which a bunch of retirement home residents discover the modern version of the fountain of youth (a swimming pool with water that has been infused with “life force” by aliens) and very much enjoy the rejuvenating effects this has on their bodies and minds. Nothing in the film suggests that immortality might be anything less than a blessing. The outlook of *Daybreakers* is much bleaker. As another character in the film, a vampire that has been cured and turned back into a human, puts it: “Life’s a bitch, and then you *don’t* die.”

However, mortality is not only present in our lives as the abstract knowledge that, someday, we are going to die, but also in the lived experience of the sheer passage of time. As the future becomes present, and the present immediately slides away and transforms into an ever-expanding past, leaving less and less future before us and cutting off possibilities that we once may have had, death takes place every day and every hour of our lives. The person that I was yesterday is dead, replaced by a new person who sees that other person as a version of himself. Yet that other person is now forever out of reach and can never be brought back to life again. That person is, for all intents and purposes, dead, no longer an active player and utterly incapable of changing anything about himself or the world. Our death is thus an ongoing process, in which the past grows constantly, while the future contracts until there is

no future left and everything is past. And, once again, it seems that is only we humans among all animals who carry the burden of our being-in-time with us, only we who, as we go forward, accumulate past in our minds, so that we age not only with and in our bodies, but also with and in our minds (Hauskeller 2011). Postmortality would therefore not only require that we no longer die (or at least no longer have to die), but also that we somehow halt the passage of time and prevent the present from becoming past, or more precisely that we find a way to overcome the *pastness* of the past and open up new futures for ourselves by either erasing the past from our minds, finding a way to reconfigure the past, or simply distancing ourselves from it so that it no longer shapes our present and thus future. As long as we are stuck with this one life, we are not truly postmortal.

What is therefore required is the possibility of new beginnings: the posthuman (as a postmortal) is one that can always start afresh, that doesn't have to take responsibility for their past life. That is not easy to accomplish. In John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966), the middle-aged banker Arthur Hamilton, who is acutely aware of living a meaningless, pointless life (being married to a woman he does not love and doing a job he has no interest in), is being offered the chance to leave everything behind and start a new life as an artist and a single. He has his death faked, undergoes cosmetic surgery, which transforms him into a much younger (or at least younger-looking) and more handsome man (played by Rock Hudson), and is given a new identity and new life. It is a life that he could have lived, had he chosen differently. But now that he has been given a "second chance", a "rebirth", he can actually live that life, *despite* having chosen differently. Initially he is thrilled to be once again "alone in the world, absolved of all responsibility, except to your own interest", but things do not go quite as planned and he starts wishing he had his own life back. When this turns out to be impossible, he asks for yet another chance, another life and identity that might suit him better, but is refused and eventually killed by the company that provided him with his new life. His attempt to escape his old life (and that means his past), has failed, mostly because he did not *really* become someone else. He looked different, and people thought he was somebody else, but inside he was still the same disillusioned middle-aged man that he used to be before his transformation. When a woman who works for the company and knows his real (or former) identity calls him a "dirty old man", he replies: "I really am."

In stark contrast, the 118-year old Nemo Nobody, in Jacob van Dormael's *Mr. Nobody* (2009), insists that the very old man that he seems to be is not really him: "that's not me; I'm nine, I'm fifteen." Nemo is the last mortal in a future world (in the year 2092) that has finally

managed to find a cure against aging (by means of telomerisation), making everyone postmortal (and, interestingly, sex obsolete). We meet Nemo when he is about to die. Since he is the last mortal the event is televised and sparks enormous interest among the postmortals. When a (postmortal) reporter interviews him, he tells him that he is not afraid to die, just afraid that he hasn't lived enough. Yet when he is asked about his life story, it gradually emerges that in his memory he hasn't lived one particular life, but at least three different ones, which all seem to be equally real: "each of these lives is the right one". Since there is no difference between what was and what could have been because anything that could have been was, and in his imagination still is, so that he past is just as real as the present (or the present just as illusionary as the past), Nemo Nobody, the "last mortal" in a society of postmortals, who is nobody and can therefore be anybody, is in fact the only true postmortal among mortals. Mortality is a function of personal identity, as personal identity is (largely) a function of memory. This is why someone who is able to forget his past and who is for this reason unhampered by his previous choices is in fact a postmortal being, like Leonard in Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), who suffers from anterograde amnesia, which allows him to constantly reinvent himself, or Joel and Clementine in Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), who forget they have ever met, so that they can live their love all over again (potentially in a cycle of eternal recurrence). In *Mr. Nobody*, memory is in fact preserved, but it is no longer identity-defining. Rather, it has become a creative force, a tool for the diversification (and hence annihilation) of the past, and that is of time itself: "We only live in the imagination of a nine-year old child, faced with an impossible choice." Since each choice that we have to make is impossible in the sense that it forces us to forego certain possibilities and to limit ourselves to one life only, and that is, to finitude, which is the essence of mortality, we can acquire a different kind of postmortality, which is synchronic rather than diachronic, by refusing to make that choice, or more precisely by finding a way to turn the could-have-been into a was and the was into an is. This is what happens in Duncan Jones's *Source Code* (2011), where a repeated mental visit to, and gradual reconfiguration of, a particular deadly event in the past (or more precisely that event's memory traces in a dead person's brain) eventually leads to the creation of a different time line, an alternate reality, in which those that were killed in the event survive and live on. Yet even more importantly, also the one who visits and alters that event (a soldier who has been fatally wounded and who is now comatose, with most of his body missing, but kept alive for this mission) creates a new reality for himself, which allows him to live on in a new healthy body and with a new identity.

The idea that postmortality could be realised by an actual separation of body and mind and the survival of the mind in a new body, or a series of new bodies, is also explored, without recourse to alternate timelines, in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* (2009-2010). Initially the series focuses on the possibility of assuming different identities related to different lives and in this manner realising what I called synchronic postmortality. The story develops around Echo, one of the dollhouse actives, who is imprinted with different personalities and sets of memories and then rented out to clients who for some reason or other need or desire a person with those particular characteristics. Those assumed identities can be understood as means to escape from the one life we are all confined to and to allow one and the same person to live different lives. The Dollhouse actives are people who have been unhappy with their lives and seek a means to escape: "I've gotta find the freedom that's promised me, freedom from our struggles and our misery, freedom is all in me to heal the pain of history" (Season 1, episode 3: The Target). However, later in the series it emerges that the personalities that the actives are imprinted with are in fact not only certain sets of character traits and memories, formerly belonging to certain real persons, but that they in fact *are* those persons, which opens up the possibility of diachronic postmortality: you can move from body to body, without changing what you are, indefinitely, the body a mere vehicle that can be discarded and replaced when no longer useful. But that of course requires the availability of bodies, and the willingness to destroy ("wipe") the persons that those bodies originally belonged to. Once again the desired postmortality has a price that others must pay. It seems that in some way or other the postmortal is always a vampire, living off the deaths of others.

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